
The National Academy of Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselors: Creating A New Professional Identity

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The National Academy of Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselors was developed by the American Mental Health Counselors Association as an effort to firmly establish the role and identity of mental health counselors in the fields of counseling and mental health. This article provides a brief background of and discusses future goals for the Academy.

The American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA) was founded in November 1976 to address the emerging field of mental health counseling and became the 13th APGA division in July 1978. Today it is the second largest division, with over 8,000 members. The AMHCA Board of Directors elected in March 1978 to establish a national certification system for mental health counselors (AMHCA, 1978), employing a "blueprint" (Messina et al., 1978) that was developed from reading federal government research concerning credentialing of health-related professions (Messina, 1979).

The AMHCA certification committee drafted, in May 1978, an initial set of procedures that were accepted by the AMHCA Board in June 1978 (AMHCA, Certification Committee, 1978, 1979). In September 1978, the AMHCA board voted to initiate those procedures. In February 1979, in Columbia, Maryland, 50 counselors (pioneers) took the first examination. At this time the group selected the formal name and the initial Board of Directors of the National Academy of Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselors (NACCMHC or the Academy). The Academy board established its final procedures, guidelines, and code of ethics in June 1979. It accepted a second set of candidates for examination in the fall of 1979.

SPECIALTY COVERED

The Academy certifies one type of counselor, a certified clinical mental health counselor (CCMHC). The Academy defines clinical mental health counseling as the process of assisting individuals or groups, through a helping relationship that includes the methods and procedures of counseling and psychotherapy, to achieve optimal mental health by means of personal and social development and adjustment in order to prevent the debilitating effects of certain somatic, emotional, and intrapersonal or interpersonal disorders (NACCMHC, 1980). As of June 1984, individuals seeking CCMHC status must (a) have a master's degree or 2 years of graduate work with a minimum of 45 semester hours in an organized program of study in clinical mental health counseling or in any allied mental health field; or (b) have a minimum of 2 years post-master's experience in a mental health setting with at least 1,500 supervised clinical hours per year and 50 hours of face-to-face supervision. A 1-year internship of a minimum of 1,000 hours may be substituted for 1 year of post-master's experience. The preferred supervisor is a CCMHC.

Currently there are 1,000 CCMHCs. There are about 200 certified annually. The first recertification process was completed in July 1984, when the pioneer CCMHCs completed their 5th year.

THE ACADEMY'S ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

The Academy is governed by a board of six members, all CCMHCs. The Academy became a corporate affiliate of APGA in 1981. It is housed in the offices of AACD in Alexandria, Virginia. Day-to-day administration is managed by a director of administrative services. The chairperson of the Academy serves on a rotating 1-year term. Each member of the board has a single 3-year term and is elected to this position by the Academy board.

REQUIREMENTS FOR APPLICANTS

Applicants for CCMHC certification must submit an application packet and pass an examination. The applicant packet is composed of three standard assessment forms to be filled out by professional colleagues or supervisors, graduate school transcripts, completed application form, professional vita, and one taped work sample and a self-evaluation of the sample.

The CCMHC examination was developed by the Professional Examination Service (PES). Although this examination was initially developed for professional counselor licensure in Virginia, it has been updated specifically for the Academy. Testing dates are in fall, spring, and summer of each year at national sites and at the annual AACD Convention. The PES examination is a 150-item, multiple-choice test lasting 4 hours. It assesses applied clinical skills through sample situations, vignettes, and descriptions. Clinical knowledge and judgment must be applied on at least 70% of the examination questions. The board waives the examination for applicants who are licensed professional counselors in states with counselor licensure. The fee for certification is \$150. CCMHCs pay an annual registration fee of \$25. In the 5th year and each consecutive 5th year, a CCMHC applies for recertification by submitting a transcript of 100 continuing education hours.

BENEFITS OF CERTIFICATION

The benefits an individual receives by becoming a CCMHC are:

1. *Professional identity:* Certification as a CCMHC identifies an individual as a specialist within the counseling profession and as a distinctive professional within the mental health field.
2. *Visibility:* The CCMHC is listed in a register that is made available to mental health centers and to consumer, insurance, and medical organizations. It is the uniform standard for identifying CCMHC-qualified mental health counselors nationwide.
3. *Credibility:* The Academy procedures are consistent, with

established national guidelines for certification of health care providers. The Academy is a free-standing corporation and is free from political pressures to dilute its standards. The Academy has a code of ethics and procedures for consumer ethical complaints.

Individuals who have become CCMHCs have reported that, as a result of certification, they have been accepted as expert witnesses in court and, in some instances, have received third-party payments. In Florida, CCMHCs are exempt from taking the examination that is required for licensed mental health counselors. After receiving certification, CCMHCs have reported merit salary increases or securing positions in the mental health field that previously were open only to social workers or psychologists. The goal of AMHCA and the Academy has been accomplished in establishing a place in the mental health field for counselors who offer preventive and growth-engendering alternatives for community mental health. This reality is used by AMHCA in its current legislative lobbying efforts to establish mental health counseling as the fifth core profession in the mental health field.

CRITICISMS

Initially, the Academy applications were overly extensive. Responding to this criticism, the Academy board simplified the procedure in 1980. A second criticism was aimed at the cost of the procedure. In 1980 the Academy board reduced the total fee to its current level of \$150, which is in line with other certification groups. A third criticism has been directed at the PES examination. Concern was that it was too analytically oriented and that the group counseling questions were too abstract. The Academy is currently revising the examination. Candidates typically praise the examination because it does not have the content orientation of other national examinations and specifically addresses issues of mental health counseling.

A final criticism was the appearance of duplication of efforts. With the phenomenal growth of the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) and the existence of the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC), there is confusion for many counselors. Counselors do not seem to understand the difference between the three boards. The NBCC is a generic certification procedure. The CRCC and the Academy are specialty boards certifying only one level of specialty, namely, rehabilitation counseling (CCRC) and mental health counseling (the Academy).

ANTICIPATED FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Organizational

The National Board for Certified Counselors has developed guidelines for specialty certification. It is anticipated that the Academy will have a clearer relationship with NBCC, reducing confusion for the consumers of these certification processes.

Use of the Academy Standards for Licensure Efforts

In Florida, licensure of mental health counselors is a result of lobbying efforts encouraging use of the Academy's criteria and procedures. The original intent of establishing the national voluntary system of certification for mental health counselors was to assist state licensure efforts. The Academy and NBCC procedures are used in lobbying efforts by individuals working on

state licensure for counselors. It is possible that some day there will be a unified system of state licensure for mental health counselors that would complement and use the Academy standards.

Research

There have been a number of research projects on the examination, entry criteria, and procedures of the Academy. There have been efforts toward developing a work simulation and computer-assisted testing technology. Research into what makes an effective mental health counselor needs to be undertaken to validate the certification process.

Accreditation

With the emergence of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), a special accreditation track for mental health counseling has been developed. It is conceivable that a graduate student from a CACREP-approved program in mental health counseling would be allowed to enter into CCMHC certification without the requirement of 2 years postgraduate work experience. This could be considered if the CACREP-approved programs included a full 1-year internship along with 2 complete years of graduate work. This needs further discussion and exploration by the two bodies.

SUMMARY

The National Academy of Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselors was developed by the American Mental Health Counselors Association as an effort to firmly establish the role and identity of mental health counselors in the field of counseling as well as in the field of mental health. Efforts of AMHCA to establish mental health counseling as the fifth core profession have used the Academy as a standard bearer of excellence. The Academy has been described as an exemplar of competency-based certification procedures. The Academy has met the dreams of its founder to establish mental health counseling as a distinct profession with standards and a code of ethics that make it distinguishable from the other core mental health professions and other counseling specialties. For further information on the Academy write:

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